

Relationships and Partnerships: The Role and Influence of Spirituality and Religion in Schools

Alison Mackie

Te Rāngai Ako me te Hauora - College of Education, Health and Human Development, University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Abstract

This literature review examines the role of religion as a platform for inclusive and community-based education in the twenty-first century. It is evident from the research that there has been a growing interest in understanding religion in education in the past decade. The focus on spiritual and religious beliefs of school leaders has identified the factors that influence school ethos to create a sense of community between school leaders, staff, students, and wider community. Faith-based schooling may have implications for teachers, who identify as homosexual, because they feel the pressure to pass on the faith that contradicts their own identity. The issues surrounding those of minority beliefs were explored through the discourse of acculturation, in particular assimilation. The focus of this review takes into consideration the student relationships between school and religion, the impact of respect from peers, the implications on students and teachers seeing religious education as a challenge, and the controversy and imbalanced nature of religious minority schools.

Keywords: *Religion, Spirituality, Beliefs, Education, Acculturation, School Leaders, Diversity.*



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Introduction

Partnerships and relationships within schools and wider communities have influenced the nature of future-focused education in New Zealand (Bolstad et al., 2012). The increased importance of diversity and inclusive education for all *ākonga* (learners) has been at the forefront of building relationships between schools and communities in regards to creating a sense of connectedness in future-oriented learning (Bolstad et al., 2012). However, considering the New Zealand Curriculum, the values page states that “diversity is found within our different cultures, languages, and heritages” (2007, p. 10). Although the New Zealand Curriculum is considered a conceptual document, to enhance *ākonga* educational experiences the interpretation of diversity needs to become broader and open for all *ākonga*. Samu (2011) takes on the interpretation of diversity as one that does beyond race, gender, and class, to redefine diversity as including ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, language, and disability. However, to enhance *ākonga* educational experience, diversity can also include religious and spiritual beliefs.

This literature review examines the strengths, challenges, and implications for teachers and *ākonga* who must navigate religious and spiritual beliefs, as well as their relationships with others in their school communities. The focus of the literature review will

cover two topics; the first being school leaders’ spiritual beliefs and that influence on school ethos. Secondly, the perspective of *ākonga* from minority beliefs and issues surrounding acculturation and assimilation.

Religion and Spirituality in 21st Century

Because this literature review is focused on religion and spiritual beliefs, a breakdown of the terminology is needed to clarify understanding. *Religion*, in this review, is a formal and structured institution and/or community, which holds a sense of belonging by a group of people (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2013). Whilst religion holds a community-based group of people, *spirituality* reflects individual feelings and beliefs, which exceed religious connections (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2013). Spirituality lends itself to thoughts that are individual and subjective to what a person may believe, in comparison to traditional organised religion (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor 2013).

In the globalised generation of the 21st century, diversity is increasing throughout all communities and, with that, more diversity in religious and spiritual beliefs are being introduced into classrooms. Tawhai (2008) states that it is essential that we teach our students the value of diversity of others, just as it is



important to teach the value of each student's own culture, language, and heritage.

Role of Spirituality in School Leaders

Through the integration of holistic principles in education, the barriers between school and their wider community can be dissolved by understanding that students are individuals, who bring with them their own cultural background, life experiences, and belief systems. However, to develop an inclusive environment for all members of the school community, this understanding should be extended out to school leaders and teachers. [Magaldi-Dopman and Park-Taylor \(2013\)](#) comment that traditional training saw school leaders and teachers separate their professional and personal lives; where their values, beliefs, and identities are separate within their professional space. This separation challenges the principles of inclusion and holistic views of students.

Perspectives on Spirituality in Leadership

[Woods \(2007\)](#) explored the influential position of school leaders in Britain, to understand how spiritual experiences can have an impact on school ethos, as well as the approach to religion in a school's hidden curriculum. A survey conducted in Britain, based on the Hardy Question¹, found that 76% of adults had experienced a spiritual influence in their life ([Woods, 2007](#)); however, out of the head-teachers researched, only 49% believed that spirituality was important to them, yet these beliefs were not solely from individuals of an organised religion.

Religion has a growing interest in education research internationally, there has also been interest in school leaders and teachers views on spirituality and religious beliefs in New Zealand. [Gibson \(2014\)](#) researched the spiritual experiences of school leaders and teachers of state schools in New Zealand. With a focus on spirituality, most of the participants saw spirituality as a social construct, that is, it is something that is influenced and shaped by life experiences and those around you, that allows you to make sense of the world ([Gibson, 2014](#)). The qualitative, multiple-site case study involved the principal and three teachers from each of three state primary schools in New Zealand.

Although [Woods \(2007\)](#) found that 49% of the participants view spirituality as an important aspect to their lives and school leadership, [Gibson \(2014\)](#) identified that all principals researched consider spirituality an important aspect to their leadership. [Gibson \(2014\)](#) suggests this may be influenced by New Zealand's pluralistic society, where our cultural beliefs are interwoven with western and traditional Māori understandings and values.

Influence on School and Wider community

Many of the head-teachers [Woods \(2007\)](#) researched brought attention to the aspect of guidance, or an inner-voice when it came to dealing with stress and difficult times, especially in regards to families and the community. [Gibson \(2014\)](#) noted the acknowledgement from the participants that spiritual perspectives allowed principals to sustain and strengthen the

relationships between staff members, pupils, and the wider community. [Gibson \(2014\)](#) also identified that participants believed that their spirituality was *filtered and fitted* "through a self-managed critical reflective process" (2014, p. 527) into the school environment to support an inclusive, relational community. An example of this process of filtering and fitting, was given by principals in the study who integrated Māori cultural aspects into their practice during special school occasions (e.g. *waiata* [Māori song] and *karakia* [Māori prayer]). By doing so, the integration and acknowledgement of indigenous religious and cultural practices as part of school traditions allowed for the relationships between school and wider community to become cohesive. Woods understanding of the role of spirituality for school leaders is that "good leadership draws on deep roots. One such root is spiritual experience" ([2007, p. 152](#)).

Implications

As [Gibson \(2014\)](#) and [Woods \(2007\)](#) suggest, the strengths of school leaders in state schools has positive influences on the ethos of their school culture and wider school communities. This has implications for those who may not believe, or may not fit into religious ideas of special character schools. The research of [Fahie \(2017\)](#) considers the experiences homosexual teachers face in Irish Catholic primary schools. From the outset of the research, it was clear that many lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers were anxious to participate, but only eight originally agreed to be a part of the research; however, the number grew to 23 when those participants asked other lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers to join ([Fahie, 2017](#)). A common theme throughout the research was a feeling of entrapment, and a need to "pass on the faith" ([Fahie, 2017](#)). One interviewee stated that they felt teaching about the Roman Catholic faith was disingenuous; "How can I teach the Catholic religion in schools when the same religion says that I am a pervert? What about the gay kids in my class or the children of gay parents?" ([Fahie, 2017, p. 17](#)). This brings into the light the implications of passing on a faith that does not align to the lifestyle and moral values the teachers hold. However, only a small sample of the interviewees saw that teaching religion with this mindset was inappropriate, and should be reserved for parents to teach their children about religion ([Fahie, 2017](#)).

Acculturation and Assimilation

As I have examined the research surrounding the influence of leaders and teachers views on spiritual and religious beliefs in school contexts, a consideration for the challenges of acculturation and assimilation of students from other religious beliefs is needed to understand the implications of religious studies in schools. *Acculturation* is a change in a group of people or society, that is composed of two dimensions; the first is the maintenance of cultural identity, and second, is the willingness to engage with a new community of people (Lustig & Koester, 1996). This can be simplified into the idea of their willingness to fit into a new societal context, through physical, biological, and social changes (Lustig & Koester, 1996). One specific type of acculturation that I examined in the literature for this review is the

¹ Hardy Question: "Do you feel that you have ever been conscious of, and perhaps influenced by, some power, whether you call it god or not, which may appear to be

beyond your individual self or partly, or even entirely, within your being?" (Woods, 2007, p. 136).

process of *assimilation*; this is where a person sees that holding on to their previous cultural norms and values is unimportant, because it is seen important to take on the cultural norms and values of the new society (Lustig & Koester, 1996). However, as New Zealand's push towards future-focused education, and inclusive and diverse pedagogical practices continues, there are many implications of ignoring acculturation and assimilation of cultural diversity

Minority Religious Education in Finland

[Zillacus and Holm \(2013\)](#) researched compulsory religious education in Finland. The basic education system, in conjunction with The Freedom of Religion Act allows all students in Finland to have lessons on their own religious beliefs, however, out of the eleven religious curricula, a student may wish to opt-out and attend an ethics class instead ([Zillacus & Holm, 2013](#)). The research was conducted from semi-structured interviews from 16 primary school students, seven teachers, and a principal. [Zillacus and Holm \(2013\)](#) found a common theme of connectedness from the students. Because the religious classes were not confined to year groups, the student participants suggested a sense of familiarity and togetherness with their school peers, as the class sizing for Orthodox religion, Islam, Roman Catholic religion, Judaism and ethics were between 6-7 participants ([Zillacus & Holm, 2013](#)). In regards to teaching, this allowed for personalised and intimate sessions, where variations to teaching practices could be experimented with – for example, field-trips, role-playing, and potluck meals ([Zillacus & Holm, 2013](#)).

Student relationship between school and religion

It is suggested that schools are the most influential spaces for acculturation to occur, as they are the point of contact for many people within the community, or as [Neins, Mawhinney, Richardson, and Chiba \(2013\)](#) state, a “socialising agent”. A school context constructs social norms through school events, hidden curriculum, and religious education that influence all of those apart of the wider school community ([Neins et al., 2013](#)). From the research conducted by [Neins et al. \(2013\)](#), the understanding of students' sense of identity, religious experiences, and perspectives on religious education, the common theme of religious faith was central factor to a sense of belonging in their wider community. The research also shed light onto immigrant students, showing how religion was as important to their identity as their culture and ethnic identity. The research of [Magaldi-Dopman and Park-Taylor \(2013\)](#) suggested the importance of holding on to their religious beliefs as an immigrant, to give a sense of guidance, a code of ethics and behaviour, and a sense of protection for those in a new and unfamiliar environment.

Respect from Peers

In regards to acculturation, many of the students in [Neins et al.'s \(2013\)](#) research, saw that respect from their peers was an integral aspect of feeling a part of the whole school community. One student referenced his peers respecting his faith by also abstaining from food whilst he was fasting for religious reasons; when asked from the interviewers, he said that it made him feel that they were real friends as the attitudes and behaviours of the

peers allowed for diversity and inclusivity of those of different beliefs ([Neins et al., 2013](#)). Many of the student participants within [Zillacus and Holm's \(2013\)](#) research into the Finnish religious education system talked about how their separate religious or ethics classes made them feel as part of a whole.

Although the students and teachers did not mention any discriminatory instances, some students, specifically from Islam, Orthodox, and Judaism classes remained silent to their peers when asked about their religious classes ([Zillacus & Holm, 2013](#)). The research suggested this silence was connected to already established stigma and prejudices towards other minority religions, and an awareness of their difference from the rest of their peers ([Zillacus & Holm, 2013](#)).

Challenges for Teachers

Although school communities hold many strengths in regards to religious and spiritual beliefs, they also hold many challenges. As suggested by [Neins et al. \(2013\)](#), students felt there was a sense of belonging within their peer group, some participants stated that the respect that came from teachers felt as if they were influenced by education policy, rather than a show of personal values ([Neins et al., 2013](#)). The research from [Magaldi-Dopman and Park-Taylor \(2013\)](#) examines the barriers between state and church in education, specifically looking into the relationship between curriculum and teacher impact on students. [Magaldi-Dopman and Park-Taylor \(2013\)](#) suggest that the bias of teachers must always be explored, because the curriculum often overlooks religious discrimination; for schools that silence religious beliefs, learners are left at risk to become marginalised, isolated, and discriminated against by their peers.

In regards to the research in Finland's compulsory religious education or ethics classes, there appeared to be some criticisms from the teachers. Due to the small number of the classes, many of the teacher participants found the lessons to be superficial and lacking in potential for the older students ([Zillacus & Holm, 2013](#)). One Jewish teacher noted that a full education in Judaism required that more than just religion to be taught, that it also needs traditional and language, which is an education that one teacher noted, could only be learnt from the family or a Jewish school ([Zillacus & Holm, 2013](#)).

Religious minority school controversy

Just as many immigrant students, and children of minority religious beliefs, face many challenges in their school communities, so too there are many religious challenges. The research of [Allen and West \(2011\)](#), who explored religious and social differences in the composition of faith and secular secondary schools across England, suggests there is a relationship between faith, school, and socioeconomic advantages, where parents who wish to send their children to a faith school are influenced by the area in which they live. The research found that those who attended faith schools were from the higher socioeconomic status of their communities, and often of the Roman Catholic and Church of England faith ([Allen & West, 2011](#)). This raised questions as to where do parents of lower socioeconomic status and from minority religious beliefs send their children who they want to be educated with their religious beliefs and values ([Allen & West, 2011](#)).

[Gulson and Webb \(2013\)](#) research into the imbalanced controversy surrounding the provision of government-funded Islamic schools in Sydney, Australia, found a common theme of islamophobia, that is, an ambient fear within the white Christian community. In a post 9/11 world, [Gulson and Webb \(2013\)](#) noted that assumptions created a need for boundaries and a management of difference. The White Australian immigration policy was seen as a reference point to marginalise those who had not assimilated into the “Australian ways” (2013, p. 636) and who were seen as “just one step away from being radicalised into terrorists” (2013, p. 636). [Gulson and Webb \(2013\)](#) suggested that resistance to assimilation, caused the wider community to mark schools of other religious beliefs as the enemy within, who “take over the suburbs, cities, and schools one at a time” (2013, p. 637).

Conclusion

A focus on understanding religion and spirituality in our globalised generation sees the need for redefining diversity to include different religious and spiritual beliefs. The notion that students and teachers must leave their cultural and religious beliefs aside in the school and professional context has been rejected with the developing features of future-focused education. However, in regards to the role of spirituality and beliefs as a driver in school communities, a sense of knowing about those in the school community allows for diversity and inclusion for all people. The influence of spirituality in school leaders had strong implications for homosexual teachers in faith-based schools, specifically in Irish Catholic schools. This led to teachers having a sense of entrapment in regards to passing on the faith in regards to beliefs and values that contradicted their own identity.

The issues surrounding acculturation and assimilation were seen through the relationships between school and religious identities. Through promoting the concept that schools are a space for socially constructed ideas, a sense of belonging for students of minority religious beliefs were solidified and strengthened through peer relationships and mutual respect. However, many of the students of minority beliefs saw the need to maintain silence about their religious beliefs, so as not to appear different from the norm. In regards to teacher and student relationships, many students felt the respect for their beliefs was forced by teachers through policy, rather than through inclusive pedagogical practices. Although the research saw religious studies for students as being prominently positive for their relationships within their community, many teachers saw teaching religious education as challenging. The common theme for teaching religion was that they saw the selected curriculum to be limited; that a whole education in religion could only be accessed at home.

Although this review only touches upon some of the challenges and strengths religious education can bring into a school, there too are many areas that still need thoughtful consideration, specifically as emerging teachers in a future-based and globalised community.

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